The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Michael D. Smith, of Virginia, to be Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from Vermont (Mr. SANDERS) is necessarily absent.

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 60, nays 39, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 487 Ex.]

YEAS—60

Baldwin	Gillibrand	Padilla
Bennet	Graham	Peters
Blumenthal	Hassan	Reed
Blunt	Heinrich	Romney
Booker	Hickenlooper	Rosen
Brown	Hirono	Schatz
Burr	Kaine	Schumer
Cantwell	Kelly	Shaheen
Capito	King	Sinema
Cardin	Klobuchar	Smith
Carper	Leahy	Stabenow
Casey	Luján	Tester
Cassidy	Manchin	Tillis
Collins	Markey	Van Hollen
Coons	Menendez	Warner
Cornyn	Merkley	Warnock
Cortez Masto	Murkowski	Warren
Duckworth	Murphy	Whitehouse
Durbin	Murray	Wicker
Feinstein	Ossoff	Wyden

NAYS—39

Barrasso	Hawley	Portman
Blackburn	Hoeven	Risch
Boozman	Hyde-Smith	Rounds
Braun	Inhofe	Rubio
Cotton	Johnson	Sasse
Cramer	Kennedy	Scott (FL)
Crapo	Lankford	Scott (SC)
Cruz	Lee	Shelby
Daines	Lummis	Sullivan
Ernst	Marshall	Thune
Fischer	McConnell	Toomey
Grassley	Moran	Tuberville
Hagerty	Paul	Young

NOT VOTING—1

Sanders

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. HICKENLOOPER). On this vote, the yeas are 60, the nays are 39.

The motion is agreed to.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant bill clerk read the nomination of Michael D. Smith, of Virginia, to be Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority whip.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the vote on the confirmation of the Smith nomination scheduled for 5:15 p.m. instead occur at 6:45 p.m.; that upon disposition of the Smith nomination, the Senate resume legislative session and that all time in relation to S.J. Res. 29 be expired.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. DURBIN. Therefore, for the information of Senators, there will be two rollcall votes beginning at 6:45 p.m.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, yesterday, Chicago reported its first case of the new coronavirus variant, Omicron. Our State's health officials predicted this day would come; it did. They are actively preparing for additional cases.

The World Health Organization has identified it as a variant of concern. It has the potential for increased transmissibility and could possibly—I underline ''possibly''—evade some protections from existing vaccines.

But as we begin to learn about this variant, some hopeful signs have emerged. On Sunday, Dr. Fauci described early data on the severity of Omicron as ''encouraging.'' Additionally, today, we received preliminary findings that patients are better protected against Omicron with a third Pfizer dose.

And while it is still too soon to draw any definitive conclusions—too soon—what is clear is that the historic investments we have made—the Senate and President Biden—these investments in public health are paying off.

Thanks to the American Rescue Plan—which we passed earlier this year on, sadly, a partisan rollcall without a single Republican vote—America is more prepared. That rescue package not only funded production and distribution of lifesaving vaccines; it paved the way for public health officials to detect and track new variants like Omicron. It provided more than a billion dollars toward expanding and accelerating genomic sequencing, the process that allows us to analyze how the coronavirus is evolving and spreading in realtime, so we can respond.

Thanks to this investment today, America is sequencing roughly 80,000 virus samples a week. Before President Biden took office, we were sequencing fewer than 3,000; now, 80,000 a week. That has made a world of difference when it comes to tracking the spread of a variant.

In less than 2 weeks since the variant was discovered in South Africa, it has been identified in at least 19 States in addition to Illinois.

As we await more data on the risk Omicron poses to the public, here are three things we know. First—and it bears repeating—the best protection is to get vaccinated. Ninety-five percent of Americans are eligible, and 70 percent have already gotten at least one shot. Within days, we will hit the impressive milestone of 200 million Americans getting fully vaccinated. We need to continue to promote this incredible safety tool, and that means booster shots as well.

Second, America must continue to support the global vaccine campaign. As I have said before, COVID doesn't know borders. As long as it is circulating across the globe, the risk of virus mutation growing stronger and roaring back into the United States continues to be real.

Fortunately, the Biden administration has already taken important steps to address global vaccine inequality and get more shots to low-income countries. Just this week, USAID announced a $400 million investment in a new global vaccine access program to deliver vaccines to remote parts of the world.

I just got off the phone with Dr. Atul Gawande, a surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital, a prolific author, and a man who is very insightful. He has agreed to step forward and to work with Administrator Samantha Power at USAID. He is the right person for this job at this very moment. So I encourage my colleagues to let him move off the calendar and into the job as quickly as possible. We need his expertise at USAID.

The third point I would like to make is that we need to build on the American Rescue Plan's investment in public health. Effective public health systems are like smoke detectors: They can alert us to deadly dangers long before they threaten.

At the start of this pandemic, America's public health system had been ignored and underfunded for years. That is the reason why we proposed nearly $10 billion in the Build Back Better plan, which we are currently working on, to improve laboratory capacity, disease detection, the workforce, and public health preparedness. This funding will fortify our public health system at a time when it is absolutely necessary.

BUILD BACK BETTER ACT

Mr. President, on a related matter, just before Thanksgiving, the House of Representatives passed the Build Back Better Act. It is one of the most pro-family pieces of legislation in modern history.

For nearly 50 years, the wealthy in America have gotten richer while the middle class has been squeezed. Build Back Better is about restoring fairness.

Four years ago, when the Republicans had their chance to use the reconciliation process, they really identified their highest priority: tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans. They continue to hold to the philosophy that if you give tax breaks to wealthy people, eventually people who are in the middle-income categories—working families—will start to see some benefits coming their way. I couldn't disagree more.

I believe investing in working families in America has always been the best investment. These are families with kids who are destined for college and even better jobs if we invest in those families and give them a fighting chance. The wealthy are going to do just fine by themselves, and they are doing pretty well, I might add.

We have got to make sure that this Build Back Better Act, which President Biden supports, really focuses on working families. And that is why the bill that passed the House has the largest tax cut for middle-class and working families ever in America's history.

That bears repeating.

Four years ago, the Republicans gave a tax break to the wealthiest people in America. The bill that we are considering will give the largest tax cut for middle class and working families in our Nation's history. It helps families with big-ticket items that keep people up at night: affordable childcare; universal pre-kindergarten; expanded, affordable healthcare coverage; help with affordable housing. It makes serious investments in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Let's be very clear about it. I can remember a time when the whole issue of climate change and global warming was a truly bipartisan concern. The bills that used to come to the floor were cosponsored by the likes of John McCain and Joe Lieberman, a Republican and a Democrat, both very seriously concerned about what was happening to the world's environment.

That is no longer the case. It is a struggle for us to get Republicans to even acknowledge that there is a challenge, let alone accept the challenge of the solutions that lie ahead.

We need to make serious investments in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the effects of climate change. And critically important to our future economic prosperity, we need Build Back Better to make investments in higher education and affordability, which is the next topic I would like to address.

PELL GRANT PROGRAM

Mr. President, the Pell Grant Program has been the cornerstone of America's investment in college student aid for more than 50 years, but it has failed to keep up with the times. It was created in 1972—think about that—almost 50 years ago, and at the time the Pell grants were worth more than 75 percent of the average cost of attending a 4-year public college or university—tuition, fees, and living expenses. The Pell grant covered 75 percent of it. Today, the Pell grant covers less than 30 percent.

Well, what makes up the difference? Student debt makes up the difference. Forty-five million Americans now own $1.7 trillion—that is with a ''t''—$1.7 trillion in student loan debt. That is more than America's combined debt to credit card companies. It is second only to mortgages. It is the largest consumer debt in America. Build Back Better will ease the squeeze of college costs by increasing the maximum Pell grant by $550. It will also expand Pell grants and other forms of Federal aid to DACA students. These historic investments will help 5 million students from lower incomes earn college degrees and build a better, stronger America.

Now, there is one item in here that I am going to close with that is very important. For years, I brought to the attention of the Senate one industry that purports to be part of education in America—for-profit colleges and universities. With this new Pell grant, we make it clear that the $550 increase will not go to for-profit colleges.

Why, you ask? Take a look at the record. The for-profit college industry is one of the most heavily federally subsidized sectors in America. Some for-profit college companies receive 100 percent of their revenue from Federal taxpayers. That is right. Pell grants and student loans make up their entire revenue.

The University of Phoenix is one of the giants in the industry—has been for years. One of the founders once called Pell grants and student loans ''the juice'' for the for-profit college industry. It was one of the largest ever increases to the Pell grant on the table. The for-profit college industry is looking for more ''juice.'' They are not going to get it, and I am glad they don't.

I would like to leave those who are following my remarks with a quiz. What percentage of post-secondary students in America attend for-profit colleges and universities? The answer: 8 percent.

Next question: What percentage of defaults on student loans are by students from for-profit colleges and universities? The answer: 30 percent—8 percent of the students and 30 percent of the student loan defaults.

Is it just bad luck? No. It is by design. For-profit colleges and universities will literally accept anyone with a pulse. You do not have to show any aptitude or any ambition. If you will sign on the dotted line and they can take over your Pell grant and hook you up with a student loan, they are perfectly happy.

Then what happens? Well, the net result of it is often disappointing. The students have to drop out. They can't continue to pay the high tuitions at these places, and when they drop out, they still have a mountain of debt to pay off. Eventually, you will get a default on it—30 percent of them are going to default on it. That is an outrageous number when you think about it. Also, I might add, these so-called colleges and universities are notorious for fraudulent conduct—misleading their students about what they are learning and what they can earn from what they learn. It is a terrible record.

For-profit colleges just spend 26 percent of their revenue on instruction. Well, what do they do with 74 percent? They market, and they take it as profit. Twenty-six percent of their revenue on education—it is a joke. And we are fools to keep perpetuating this terrible drain on the American economy and this terrible hardship on some of these students and their families.

So over the last 20 years, nearly every major for-profit college has been investigated and sued by State and Federal agencies for deception and abusive practices.

Many, like the University of Phoenix, and DeVry, which sadly is from the city of Chicago, got paid tens of millions of dollars in Federal subsidies. Since the collapse of the most infamous for-profit colleges—Corinthian and ITT Tech—we see taxpayers holding the bag for the defaulted student loans to the tune of millions of dollars.

So let's be clear. Adding new program protections in Build Back Better is not about Congress punishing students. The for-profit college industry is doing that quite well by themselves. This is about protecting traditionally underserved and marginalized students and preventing taxpayer dollars from being wasted on these miserable institutions.

In closing, I ask unanimous consent to enter into the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD a letter from a coalition of groups urging Congress to support these new protections for Pell grants—among them, the National Urban League, the Education Trust, and Veterans Education Success.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

NOVEMBER 17, 2021.

Hon. NANCY PELOSI,
Speaker, House of Representatives, Washington, DC.
Hon. CHUCK SCHUMER,
Majority Leader, U.S. Senate, Washington, DC.

DEAR SPEAKER PELOSI AND LEADER SCHUMER: We represent a broad coalition of organizations working on behalf of students, veterans, faculty and staff, civil rights advocates, researchers, and others concerned about career education programs that leave students with debts they cannot afford. Predatory schools leave students with unfair and unaffordable student loan debt and leave taxpayers exposed when students cannot repay those debts.

We strongly support the Build Back Better bill's investments in higher education, including the $550 increase to the maximum Pell grant. Pell grants have helped millions of low- and moderate-income Americans, most with family incomes under $40,000, attend and complete college. We also support incentivizing students to attend schools where Pell grant dollars will go the furthest, and where increases in aid are less likely to translate into increased tuition costs and debt. Excluding schools that operate on a for-profit basis will promote both goals.

Research shows that—in contrast to other sectors of higher education—tuition rises at for-profit colleges when additional federal financial aid is made available to the sector. Further, investigations and data spanning more than a decade show that for-profit colleges, overall, provide worse outcomes for students than other sectors of higher education. High prices, low spending on instruction, and high dropout rates at many for-profit schools have left former students, including a disproportionate share of Black and Latina/o borrowers, buried in debt and without the career advancement they sought.

For-profit colleges spend just 26 percent of the tuition revenue they receive on instruction, compared to 79 percent at nonprofit colleges and an even higher percent at four-year public colleges. Just 25 percent of for-profit students graduate with a bachelor's degree in six years, compared to 61–67 percent in other four-year sectors. For-profit institutions account for less than 10 percent of overall college enrollment but make up one-third of all students in default.